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SUBJECT: UNSC: JANUARY MIDDLE EAST BRIEFING

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. Summary: In the monthly briefing to the Security Council on the situation in the Middle East, U/SYG Ibrahim Gambari welcomed recent political initiatives but observed "none of us can afford another year like the last one in Lebanon and the Middle East." Council members applauded Secretary Rice's most recent Middle East visit, conveyed high expectations for the February 2 Quartet meeting, expressed support for the current Paris III conference, and urged all Lebanese factions to refrain from violence and return to dialogue. France called for an expansion of the Quartet to include key regional actors and, supported by Russia, the organization of an international conference. Qatar said that the concept of an interim Palestinian State with provisional borders is unacceptable and unilateral. Indonesia said the impasse in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict requires "an unprecedented step by all." Slovakia, slated to be President of the Council in February, announced the Council would hold an open debate on the Middle East following the Quartet meeting. End Summary.

Heightened Insecurity, Renewed International Urgency

¶2. In his January 25 "Briefing to the Security Council on the Situation in the Middle East," Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs Ibrahim Gambari characterized events since the December report as "a period of heightened levels of insecurity and suffering, combined with a renewed sense of international urgency to find a political way ahead..." Gambari noted, however, "that the evolving Israeli-Palestinian dialogue is complicated by the internal political situation in both the occupied Palestinian territories and Israel."

¶3. On specific Israeli-Palestinian developments during the period, Gambari reported that the cease-fire agreed to at the end of November in Gaza remains place and has significantly reduced violence, although the cease-fire has not been extended to the West Bank. He also cited the December Abbas/Olmert agreement to resume the work of the quadripartite security committee and Israel's transfer of USD 100 million of Palestinian clearance revenues as positive events. But he expressed concern about the impact of Israel's continuing settlement activities, the ongoing construction of the security barrier and Palestinian factional tension. Gambari specifically noted Hamas leader Khaled Mashal's recent remark to the press that Israel's existence is a reality and that with the formation of a Palestinian state, "there will remain a state called Israel, this is a matter of fact." He also cited press reports, and subsequent denials, of Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

¶4. Recalling the one-year anniversary of Palestinian elections that brought Hamas to power, Gambari reported that international aid to the Palestinians has actually increased;

what is different is that aid is mostly bypassing the Palestinian government. He argued that without greater freedom of access and movement and an active peace process, aid could only contain the spread of grievances and instability.

¶15. On Lebanon, Gambari noted the Secretary-General's participation in the Paris III conference, the UN's strong support of Lebanon and the need to break the political impasse through dialogue. Gambari concluded, "none of us can afford another year like the last one in Lebanon and the Middle East" and reported that the new Secretary-General considers next week's Quartet meeting as an important opportunity to re-energize the peace process and implement all relevant Security Council resolutions.

Security Council Members Comment

¶16. Following Gambari's presentation, Security Council members met privately and expressed appreciation and support for Secretary Rice's efforts to reinvigorate the Middle East

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political process, conveyed high expectations for the February 2 meeting of the Quartet, and reiterated their support for the Roadmap. Per reftel points, Ambassador Wolff welcomed recent encouraging developments on the Israeli-Palestinian track. On Lebanon, Ambassador Wolff said that the Administration would seek Congressional approval for a substantial assistance package for Lebanon. He also expressed U.S. concern about developments in Lebanon, especially the use of violence, threats, and intimidation, urging restraint and a return to dialogue.

¶17. France, in its statement, called for an expansion of the

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Quartet to include key regional actors, endorsed the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, and called for the organization of an international conference "to provide a solid foundation for efforts to bring about a solution to the situation in the Middle East." Russia, seconded the convening of an international conference, noting that it had offered to host such a meeting more than a year ago. South Africa highlighted U/SYG Gambari's report that the situation was still dire in the West Bank. That view was seconded by Indonesia, which called for an extension and argued that the current impasse "requires an unprecedented step by all." South Africa also said that while the Israeli release of USD 100 million was appreciated, all the retained money should be released as it belonged to the Palestinians. In its remarks, Qatar took pains to make clear that the concept of an interim Palestinian state with provisional borders is unacceptable and unilateral, calling for a "just, permanent, and comprehensive" agreement.

¶18. On Lebanon, all Council members expressed concern about the current violence and urged all parties to return to dialogue to resolve political differences. Responding to an Italian question on the status of the Shebaa Farms, Gambari said that Lebanese PM Siniora wanted the issue resolved so as to deprive Hizballah of its continuing justification for its actions. He said that UN cartographers are preparing a report on Shebaa Farms that will be delivered in March as part of the expected UNSCR 1701 report. Responding to a question about the role of the UN in the Quartet, Gambari said that Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon hoped to help revitalize the political process, while acknowledging that there is no substitute for dialogue between the parties.

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